A Dictionary of English in Multicultural Toronto

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Introduction

What's your first thought when you think of the word "slang"? Maybe you think of acronyms you use while chatting on social media, or a sticker you might see sold in a gift store downtown, or it's the colourful graffiti you often see out of the window while riding the TTC. This form of language frequently appears in the lives of Torontonians, especially among youth, and the emergence of what is sometimes called the Toronto slang or accent responds to the multilingual experiences of Torontonians.

Toronto is the most multicultural city in the world. The 2021 Census shows that 55.7% of Toronto's population are visible minorities[1]. One wave of Black Jamican immigration was the Caribbean Domestic Scheme, a domestic workers program for single women in the 1950s. The immigration wave of the 1960s brought more people from these areas to Canada because of the change from country of origin to a less discriminatory points system. The majority of Somalis came to Canada between 1991 - 2000 (almost 40% of the total Somali population in Canada came during this time period) due to the Somali Civil War[2]. As each immigrant community continued to expand, the languages they brought with them began to spread as well within the Toronto area. The 2021 Census indicates that 3.7% of Toronto's population speak a Middle Eastern language (Semitic language) and 2.7% of Toronto's population speak Arabic[3]. According to Professor Derek Denis from the University of Toronto, a common Toronto interjection, Wallahi ['I swear to God', used to add emphasis] comes from Somali/Liturgical

Arabic; as well as another common interjection, miskeen [a pathetic or misfortunate person]. However, the Jamaican community has had the greatest influence on English in Toronto, as many of the words come from Jamaican Patois[4]. In fact, London, England and Toronto share some words, like mans [can be used in place of people, usually refers to 'I, you, we, me, us, them'], due to both cities' large Jamaican population[5]. Michie Mee is a Jamaican-Canadian singer from the 1990s who was one of the first to use patois in her rap songs[6]. Jamaican-Canadian rapper Kardinal Offishal's song, "Bakardi Slang", from the 2000s makes Toronto slang the defining feature: "T-dot say's 'Ya dun know[7]'". Perhaps inspired by Kardinal's hit song, 2006 was the first time Toronto slang or accent was mentioned in any formal or academic study[8]. The Caribbean, Somali, and Middle Eastern communities have an important influence on Toronto slang.

In recent years, there have been many scholarly studies of slang in the local communities of Toronto. There are now many online dictionaries that have entries for Canadian Slang, such as Urban Dictionary. There are also paper dictionaries on worldwide slang updated annually. However, few dictionaries have focused solely on the multiculturally-influenced language of Toronto. Due to the size of Toronto, there is a lack of uniformity in the terms that people are aware of.

This dictionary is inspired by the collaborational project conducted by the Canadian Language Museum, researchers at the University of Toronto Mississauga, and The Spot (a youth centre in the Jane-

Finch area). It collects some of the words and phrases used in the city with playable audio or video examples, lexical properties, explanations/definitions and some usage example sentences for each entry. Some people have misconceptions that slang is impolite, unprofessional and grammatically incorrect. The reality is that different dialects of English have their own vocabulary, grammatical rules and pronunciation. The existence of diverse English dialects, including Toronto's own, helps enhance community, creativity, and communication; and encouraging it can counteract misconceptions about linguistic differences. The goal of this dictionary is to demonstrate and celebrate the rich linguistic landscape of Toronto, but it is not intended to be a complete list and only shows a snippet of the diversity of English in multicultural Toronto.

-- Melissa Douglas and Shiyan Liang.

An example of the dictionary's format is as follows:

Word *type of word(noun etc)* direct translation (if possible); definition/explanation; Usage note: if needed. Source: Language/Dialect.

E.g., example, written/audio/audiovisual

T-dot *noun* nickname for Toronto, Ontario. Source: Toronto English.

E.g., "The Anthem" (2010) by Kardinal Offishall

"I'm from the T-dot Oh,
Rep it everywhere I go"

Warning: Some of the words, definitions and/or examples include explicit language.

A

aboki *pronoun* my friend; sometimes the word is also used to describe a poor person from the Northern region of Nigeria. Source: Hausa (Nigeria)

E.g.,"This guy's my aboki."

ah lie/ahlie *interjection/exclamation* direct translation: Right?; Usually used at the end of the sentence in agreement with another person in conversation, or to express disbelief. Source: Jamaican Patois.

E.g., "She is so pretty, ahlie?"

B

bare *determiner, adjective* many, a lot. Source: Jamaican Patois.

e.g., " "There were bare people at Caribana this year!"

bredrin/brethren *pronoun* direct translation: brother; good friend, homie. Source: Jamaican Patois.

E.g., "Everyday (Rudebwoy)" (2005) by Kardinal Offishall

"I used to hear second-hand from her brethren
That the youth was vexed [annoyed], 'Yo Kardinal I need food'"

bucktee *noun* a homeless person; drug addict, loser. Source: Somali.

E.g.,"He's a bucktee, not even worth arguing with him."

bumboclot/bumbaclot/bumbaclart *noun/interjection* direct translation: bum cloth; a cloth used to wipe one's behind; an explicit interjection used to express surprise or anger; can also be an insult or an intensifier. Source: Jamaican Patois.

E.g., "Bumbaclot! Why are there still dishes in the sink after I told you to clean up!"

C

cop *verb* to have, get, buy or retrieve something. Source: Unknown.

E.g., "Lemme cop that charger from you."

cheesed *verb, adjective* to be mad, agitated, annoyed, or pissed off. Source: Toronto English.

E.g., "Man, I'm CHEESED! All the Raptors tickets are sold out."

cut *verb* to leave. Source: Toronto English.

E.g., "Super Soca Sunday - Judge Tyco EP 1" (2019) by Random Order Studios

"I'm about to cut"

D

deep it/dep it *verb* to look closely/really think about something; to have a deep introspection about a situation. Source: Unknown.

E.g., "Bro, deep it, he still wants to thief your money.

degen *noun* a degenerate/immoral person; In gaming, a person who cheats, exploits loopholes, or uses hacks to gain an unfair advantage over other players; in cryptocurrencies, a person who engages in high risk trade without proper consideration of the consequences; believed to have originated from the word "degenerate". Source: English.

E.g., "Yo, that guy just put milk before cereal, what a degen haha."

dess *adjective* conventionally unattractive; insult. Source: Unknown.

E.g., "Whatever, he's dess anyway!"

dukes *noun* parent(s); can refer to either mother or father, or both parents. Source: Unknown.

E.g., "T-Dot Goon Scrap DVD 2 — ft. Drake (Comedy Sketch)" (2017) by Random Order Studios

"Dat's 9 bucks on my dukes' credit card. Yuh not gonna respect the dukes?" (Translation: That's nine bucks on my parents' credit card. You're not gonna respect my parents?)

dunno/dun knoe/dun know *greeting/interjection/ agreement* direct translation: done; bye can be used at the end of a sentence or when somebody is bothering you say dunnoe to brush them off. Usage note: Dunno has a variety of meanings depending on the context. Source: Jamaican Patois.
E.g., "Bakardi Slang" (2000) by Kardinal Offishal

'We don't say, "You know what I'm saying,"
T-dot say's "Yuh dun know"'

F

from time *phrase of time* for a long time; from way back when. Source: Jamaican Patois.

E.g.,"I've been going to this restaurant from time."

fam *noun* short form of family (direct translation); friend, used at the end of a sentence as a form of address.

E.g., Stay Alive" (2020) by Mustafa

"I care about you fam"

G

gyal dem *noun* a group of attractive women. Source: Jamaican Patois.

E.g., "Yo look, gyal dem coming this way".

H

Headtop *noun* direct translation: the top of a person's head; head, noggin. Source: Jamaican Patois.

E.g., "Bana Weekend Waste Yute - Judge Tyco EP 6" (2019) by Random Order Studios

"Ah, all Imma say is that a certain judge made a certain chair fly into a certain mans headtop"

J

joke ting *noun* a joke; something not to be taken seriously. Source: Jamaican Patois.

E.g., "It's just a prank, joke ting."

K

kawal/kawalis *verb* finessing/cheating someone Source: Somali.

E.g. "Yo, I'm gonna kawalis him for some tickets."

kwasea/kwasia *noun/adjective* idiot, fool. Source: Twi (Ghanaian Akan language).

E.g.,"Kwasia" (2017) by Nonso Amadi featuring Eugy

"Me say Kwasia, Kwasia
Are you still out there cheating"

L

leng *adjective* pretty, beautiful, aesthetically pleasing. Usage note: also used in Multicultural London English. Source: Unknown.

E.g.,"I was talking to this leng guy!

M

mans *pronoun* can be used in place of people, usually refers to "I, you, we, me, us, them"; Source: Unknown.

E.g., "Air Forces" (2021) by Mustafa

"Then you see obviously mans comin' over at the green box,
Just crackin' jokes, kickin' up"

man dem *noun* the boys/friends/guys, can be used to reference strangers or people known to the user. Source: Jamaican Patois.

E.g., "Jamaican Funk Canadian Style" (1991) by Michie Mee & DJ L.A. Luv

"Wah mehk di man dem a run afta she?" (Translation: What makes men (man dem) pursue her?)

maritess/marites *noun* refers to a person who loves gossip. Source: Filipino Tagalog

E.g.,"Don't tell her any of your secrets, she's a marites."

marved *adjective* starving; originates from the English term "starved" hungry; Source: English.

E.g., "When will this meeting be done? I'm marved."

Mashallah *interjection* is an Arabic phrase used to show appreciation for a person or happening. It shows respect and reminds that God's will achieves everything. The closest English translation is "God willed it." It is used to show joy and praise, and is evoked upon hearing good news. This is a word used for religious purposes in Islam, in Toronto English it is usually used without religious connotation. Source: Liturgical Arabic/ Somali

E.g.,"You look beautiful tonight, mashallah!"

miskeen *adjective* a poor, pathetic or misfortunate person; sometimes used to describe people as innocent and naive. Source: Arabic/Somali.

E.g., "What a miskeen child!ʔ"

murked *verb/adjective* to be murdered or badly defeated; ugly, can also be used as an insult. Source: Unknown.

E.g., "We murked that team at baseball last week!"

N

nyah/nyeah eh *interjection* yeah eh with a prothetic 'n'; huh?", "right?" or "don't you?" Usage note: can also be used when people are surprised, wondering, or excited. Source: English.

nize it/nize your beak shut up or be quiet; stop talking. "Nize" is Patois for noise. Source: Jamaican Patois.

E.g., "Nize it, I don't want to hear you speak no more."

P

pussyclot/claat *noun/interjection* direct translation: vaginal/menstrual cloth. Used in the same way as bumboclat as an explicit interjection. Source: Jamaican Patois.

E.g., "Pussyclot...why are they calling me now?!"

R

reach *verb* to arrive, be there; to come or go somewhere.

E.g, "You reaching the party tonight?"

S

say word? *adverb* really? Source: African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

E.g., "Did you hear the news? Liam just lost all his money to a crypto scam!
Say word?"

shorty/shordie *pronoun* girls, women, females. Source: African American Vernacular English .

E.g., "Super Soca Sunday - Judge Tyco EP 1" (2019) by Random Order Studios

"And yuh know da shordie on da flyer too." (Translation: And you know a female is on the flyer too.")

still/styll *interjection* used for emphasis; to point out the fact; though; usually at the end of a statement. Source: English.

E.g.,"I just been to the gym but I'm 'bout to reach K-BBQ styll.[10]"

T

T-dot *noun* nickname for Toronto, Ontario. Source: Toronto English.

E.g., "The Anthem" (2010) by Kardinal Offishall

"I'm from the T-dot Oh,
Rep it everywhere I go"

The 6ix/six/6 *noun* nickname for Toronto, refers to the city's six districts and area code "416"; Source: Drake and Jimmy Prime coined this term.

E.g., "You & The 6" by Drake

"Yeah, this is a crazy life,
But you and the six raised me right"

ting *noun* direct translation: thing; significant other, an attractive/pretty woman; can also be used to refer to an attractive man or person. Source: Jamaican Patois.

E.g.,"X-Ting" (2021) by Sadboi

"My ex ting callin',
Said he ready put the hoes to the side,
But when they callin' I can watch him decline'"

top left *interjection* seriously, hand on your heart (cross my heart and hope to die), deadass. Source: Unknown.

E.g., "T-Dot Goon Scrap DVD 2 — ft. Drake (Comedy Sketch)" (2017) by Random Order Studios

"So yo, top left, cop T-Dot Good Scrap DVD 2017."

To suck/kiss one's teeth *audible expression* a physical gesture where one sucks air through teeth while pressing one's tongue against those teeth. Source: Caribbean/West African.

E.g., *SUCK TEETH COMPOSITIONS* - "Three Channels: View Excerpt" (2018) by Michelle Pearson Clarke

W

Wallahi *interjection* direct translation 'By God/I swear to God'; used to add emphasis; Usage note: This is a word used for religious purposes in Islam. In Toronto English it is usually used without religious connotation, much in the same way that 'I swear (to God)' is used. Source: Liturgical Arabic/Somali.

E.g., "I'll be there at 7:00, Wallahi![11]"

wah gwan/wagwan *greeting/interjection* What's going on?/What's up?/How are you? Source: Jamaican Patois.

E.g., "Wagwan bredrin?"

wasteman *pronoun*

E.g., "T-Dot Goon Scrap DVD (Comedy Sketch)" (2016) by Random Order Studios

"You're a wasteman."

waste yute/wasteyute *pronoun* direct translation: waste youth. Good for nothing/stupid (young) person; insult. Interchangeable with waste yute. Source: Jamaican Patois.

E.g., Your brother is a waste yute! All he does is play video games all day.

Whatchu depon? *greeting* What are you doing/What's going on? Source: Jamaican Patois.

Y

Y pree *greeting/verb* what's up; to check out. Source: Jamaican Patois.

E.g., "Y Pree dawg! Are you going out later?[12]"

Endnotes

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